

## Poetic Voice of Sarojini Naidu: A Study

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### Abstract

Sarojini Naidu is popularly known as the Bharat **Kokila** or **The Nightingale of India**, is the most lyrical woman poet and a feminist. In her perfect lyricism and mellifluous melody she is indeed the nightingale of India. She is a singer of India's glory, India's fauna and flora. She pictures in melodious strains the landscape of the Deccan. Whereas the western critics would categorize her with Shelley and Keats. She once described herself as a 'wild free thing of the air like the birds with a song in her heart'. This self portrait reveals her essential poetic temperament and lyrical gifts. Spontaneity and naturalness of manner give her poetry a distinct bird like quality and melodic beauty. Besides a melodist and a singer, she is a lover of beauty. She is a Romanticist too. She deals with love as a major theme in her poetry. Her poems reveal the authentic heart of India. Under advice from Edmund Gosse, she undertook to write on Indian themes and subjects. As the Nightingale of India, Sarojini Naidu is also sensitive to beauty, the beauty of living things, the beauty of holiness, the beauty of Buddha's compassion, the beauty of Brindavan's land. She did not specially seek the bizarre, the exotic, the exceptional, but her poems lack neither the variety nor the flavour of actuality.

**Keywords:** Poetic Voice, Sarojini Naidu, Nature poems, the snake and humayun to zobeida and the time of roses

**Introduction:** Sarojini Naidu, lovingly called the **Nightingale of India**, holds an esteemed place in India's political as well as literary history. Besides being a supporter of civil rights, woman's emancipation and anti-imperialist beliefs, she was also the first Indian woman to be selected as Governor of an Indian State and to serve as President of the Indian National Congress. She was writing during the transitional period from the Colonial to the Post-colonial era, and thus, her works explore Postcolonial themes like culture and history, as well as the conflicts between the East and the West, in an aesthetic fashion. Sarojini Naidu was a poet as well as a patriot, and we see an amalgamation of both these sides of her personality in her literary works. Naidu was a progressive thinker. Throughout her life, she advocated civil rights, anti-imperialism, and women empowerment. Thus not only did she enrich Indian English Poetry through her literary achievements, but also contributed immensely to the Indian Freedom Struggle. She belonged to the group of writers who believed in the power of giving Indian sensibilities to English. Naidu, thence, wrote in English, and was one of the first Indian English Poets to gain a huge Western audience and positive criticism. She is rightly called the Nightingale of India because she had "the God-gifted organ voice" and her poetry mirrors a true picture of Indian scenes deeply soaked in the Indian culture and civilization. '*Wandering Beggars*', '*Wandering Singers*', '*Snake-charmers*', '*Palanquin Bearers*', '*The Flute player of Brindaban*', '*Song of Radha*', '*The Milkmaid*', '*The Vasant Panchami*', '*Raksha Bandhan*'---- all these poems reveal the real story of Indian Society. And the Indian Characters recreated by her make her stand out among the greatest poets of the World. Sarojini Naidu, often considered a child prodigy, began writing around the age of twelve. Despite writing in the British Romantic tradition of lyric poetry, her works align with her Indian Nationalist Politics, often using sense-evoking imagery to paint an aesthetic portrait of India. For the same reason, she has also been called the "*Indian Yeats*".

Sarojini Naidu's first collection of poems was published in London in 1905 by the name of *The Golden Threshold* when she was just twenty-six years old. Edmund Gosse recommended its publication and this edition included an introductory section by Arthur Symonds. *The Bird of Time: Songs of Life, Death, and the Spring* was her second poetry collection. It was published in 1912, in both London and New York. Here she openly questioned Caste Barriers and Gender Inequality. It is rooted in the British romantic poetry tradition, yet deals more strongly with nationalist themes. Here, in a particular poem, Naidu imagines time as a bird and expresses the

passing of time via the movements of a bird and the lens of nature. She uses abstract symbolism to convey deeper ideas, or perhaps even personal truth. This volume also contains her most famous poem, “*In the Bazaars of Hyderabad*”. *The Broken Wing* ( 1917), her third publication, was included in *The Sceptred Flute*, published by Dodd, Mead and Co., New York in 1937. *The Feather of Dawn*, a book of poems edited by her daughter Padmaja Naidu, was published in 1961, twelve years after the poetess’s death. The present paper is a genuine effort to reveal her personality as a singer of beautiful songs; she emerged as the very soul of India and how she was attached firmly to the its soil. Blessed with remarkable creative talent, she adroitly composed charming songs with a striking note of native fervour. Her poetry ranges from children’s poems to poems dealing with critical themes like tragedy, romance, patriotism, civil rights, women emancipation, and more.

Her activism was governed by strong, clear ideals. “We want deeper sincerity of motive, a greater courage in speech, and earnestness in action,” said Naidu and reflected the same in her poetry along with her social activism. Her political activism was deeply rooted in beliefs of justice and equality. “When there is oppression, the only self-respecting thing is to rise and say this shall cease today, because my right is justice. If you are stronger, you have to help the weaker boy or girl both in play and in the work.”

### POETIC VOICES

Sarojini Naidu is popularly known as the Bharat Kokila or The Nightingale of India, is the most lyrical woman poet. In her perfect lyricism and mellifluous melody she is indeed the nightingale of India. She is a singer of India’s glory, India’s present, India’s fauna and flora. She pictures in melodious strains the landscape of the Deccan. Whereas the western critics would categorize her with Shelley and Keats. She once described herself as ‘a wild free thing of the air like the birds with a song in her heart’. This self portrait reveals her essential poetic temperament and lyrical gifts. Spontaneity and naturalness of manner give her poetry a distinct bird like quality and melodic beauty. Besides a melodist and a singer, she is a lover of beauty. She is a romanticist too. She deals with love as a major theme in her poetry. Under advice from Edmund Gosse she undertook to write on Indian themes and subjects. As the Nightingale of India, Sarojini Naidu is also sensitive to beauty; the beauty of living things; the beauty of holiness; the beauty of Buddha’s compassion; the beauty of Brindavan’s land. She did not specially seek the bizarre, the exotic, the exceptional, and her poems lack neither the variety nor the flavour of actuality.

### Rasa and the senses in Naidu’s poetry

While critics of Naidu’s work—in her time and ours—have largely focused on the question of her self-orientalisation, few have focused on the influence of Indian aesthetics in her work. Lokuge is the exception to the rule. She argues that Naidu enacts a poetic tradition that is, in fact, as much Indian in aesthetics and cultural tradition as it is English in language. As summarized above, Lokuge analyses four aspects of Naidu’s poetics as characteristically Indian, including the aesthetics of *Rasa*. As Lokuge points out, Naidu’s ‘poetic temperament was embedded in the indigenous *Rasa* tradition, which in its tantric reach is a seamless amalgam of sentiment and spirituality’. To exemplify Naidu’s indebtedness to Indian aesthetics general and to *rasa* in particular, Lokuge emphasises Naidu’s own observation: ‘My ancestors for thousands of years...have been lovers of the forest and mountain caves, great dreamers, great scholars, great ascetics’. Lokuge goes on to argue that this conscious positioning within the ancient Indian aesthetic tradition of *rasa* was a ‘deliberate doubling’ on Naidu’s part: ‘a self-orientation within the Indian aesthetic and self-orientalization through it’. I want to expand Lokuge’s argument by analyzing the particular role of the senses in evoking *rasa* throughout Naidu’s poetry. My argument, in a nutshell, is that the senses play a crucial role in evoking *rasa* because *rasa* relies on perception in order to evoke sensations and emotions, and in order to perceive, we need to use our senses. The link between *rasa* and the senses is already implied in its literal meaning, as *rasa* is commonly translated from Sanskrit into English as ‘sap’, ‘juice’ or ‘essence’. In the

context of art, this essence is emotion. As already sketched in the introduction, Naidu evokes emotive and multi-sensory sensescapes throughout her poetry. The written word thus becomes a signifier of the sensory experiences it mediates. And the multi-sensory sensescape that Naidu writes into her poetry evokes an aesthetic experience that can conclusively be understood in the context of *rasa*.

In her poetry, Sarojini Naidu often describes impressions, sounds, smells, flavours and—albeit to a lesser extent—textures, all of which evoke a sensescape. The term, as defined by Howes, focuses on the sensory dimensions of a particular place or space. Howes emphasises the cultural dimension of sensescapes, which renders the senses and sensations meaningful within the cultural context of a particular place or space. In Howes' words, sensescapes encompass 'the idea that the experience of the environment, and of the other persons and things which inhabit the environment, is produced by a particular mode of distinguishing, valuing and combining the senses in the culture under study'. This cultural dimension of sensescapes brings us back to the preceding discussion of Naidu's poetics and the criticism of inauthenticity, both by Gosse (about her early poems 'in an English vein') and by Basu (about her 'inauthentic and unrealistic' Indian poems). Both accusations rest on essentialising definitions of authenticity that do not allow for Naidu's lived experience of cultural hybridity. In the following analysis, I suggest that there is more to Naidu's sensescapes than their evocation (or not) of authenticity, and that we can instead read them on a thematic level as evocations of immortality and, on an aesthetic level, as evocations of beauty and *rasa*.

Naidu's spring poems provide particularly vivid examples of her poetic sensescapes. As in her letter to Symons, fleeting impressions, smells and sounds are especially prevalent. Smell and hearing in particular are senses that are in and of themselves time-bound and fleeting, and they evoke a poetic world that is equally ephemeral. At the same time, that world is granted immortality through the very act of being inscribed in poetry. In the poem '*Champak Blossoms*', published in Naidu's 1912 collection, *The Bird of Time*, smells and sounds are linked to the fleeting nature of spring and life. The poem evokes the 'ambrosial sweetness' of the titular blossoms that, with their 'fragrant hearts', fling their 'rich, voluptuous, magical perfume/To ravish the winds of spring' Thus, the smell of the blossoms is immediately linked to the season of spring, and both are marked as transient from the beginning of the poem: 'Foredoomed in your hour of transient glory/To shrivel and shrink and fade!' The second stanza presents the contrasting case of mango and orange blossoms, which, although they are shed and 'have long since vanished' are given a new lease of life 'in the luscious harvests/Of ripening yellow and red' (ll. 9–10). In other, and less poetic, words, the blossoms turn into fruit, which can then be eaten. The champak blossoms, on the other hand, are denied this second lease of life, as they only serve decorative purposes: 'to girdle a girl's dark tresses' and 'to garland the vernal breezes' Here, the flowers are not only linked to spring ('the vernal breezes'), but also to youth ('a girl's dark tresses'), and youth, like spring, and like the fragrance of the blossoms, is transient and will fade. Their 'purposeless beauty' dooms the champak blossoms, which, when their 'delicate bloom is over,/Will reckon amongst the dead'. Stanza four, however, proposes another means of resurrection, namely the immortality of poetry itself: 'Yet, 'tis of you thro' the moonlit ages/That maidens and minstrels sing'. We can read the song of the 'maidens and minstrels' as analogous to the poem itself. Thus, the poem renders permanence to the transience of smells, blossoms, spring, beauty, youth and life.

There are greater poets than Sarojini Naidu but none more original because she saw things with a fresh approach. Much of it is beautiful without being difficult. She conveyed her private fancies beautifully and lent them universal touch. Her major themes were nature, love, life and death, folk life, patriotism and mysticism. One of the striking themes of Naidu's poetry is folk life of India. Her poetry gained vitality and spontaneity through the folk inspiration. Her folk poetry reflected simplicity and contained vocabulary and imagery from everyday scenes and sights

which showed her sense of solidarity with folk life as it is lived from day to day. Her poetry reflects her love for her nation and sings the joys and sorrows of her people. A. N. Dwivedi points out aptly:

A poet is a person of sharp sensibility and deep insight and is primarily guided and controlled by his inner urges. But he is also a social being, even if for a moment or two. experience. These other experiences supply food to his inner experiences. (Sarojini Naidu and Her Poetry. 1981, 51)

Sarojini Naidu was sensitive towards Indian folk traditions. Though she belonged to the aristocratic society, yet she was sympathetic towards the humble lives lead by the weaker section of Indian society. Affinity for humble folks is one of the important aspects of Sarojini Naidu's poems which are based on folk life. According to Rameshwar Gupta, her poetry, "has the undertone of our daily sorrows and joys: it bears the echoes of a human heart" (in Grover and Arora 1993, 295).

Sarojini Naidu had compassion towards the humble folks of her motherland. She projected their toil in day to day life. She sang of their sorrows and joys, hopes and aspirations. Gokak says, "She has almost a psychic sympathy with the great cavalcade of India's wandering singers and dancers and other humbler folks" (in Grover and Arora 1993, 410). Sarojini Naidu's poems on folk life of India have a variety of aspects. Some depict the toil of ordinary people, some sing of the feeling of brotherhood, some portray the joy of celebrating a festival together by the village folks.

Like Tagore, Sarojini Naidu was also a great lover of humanity and throughout her life she strived to serve the humble and the oppressed. She had observed minutely the lives of the humble folks of her country and appreciated their participation in humble activities of day to day life through her poetry. Sarojini Naidu painted beautiful picture of various occupations that were prevalent during her time and which are even now an important aspect of Indian life such as the weavers, fishermen, bangle sellers etc. "*Coromandel Fishers*" is a lyric enriched with vivid imagery and folk culture of the Coromandel Coast of India. It depicts the relationship of fishermen with the world of nature. In the poem human emotions are set against the world of Nature. The first stanza of the poem depicts the solidarity between the fishermen. It is one of the important aspects of folk life in India. The poem begins with an optimistic note:

Rise, brothers, rise; the wakening skies pray to the morning light, The wind lies asleep in the arms of the dawn like a child that has cried all night. Come, let us gather our nets from the shore and set our catamarans free, To capture the leaping wealth of the tide, for we are the kings of the sea! (1958, 1-4)

Man-Nature relationship is beautifully depicted in this poem. We find a deep relationship between man and Nature. Nature stands as a symbol of beauty that brings optimistic view of life, that consoles and brings forth a special meaning and message in man's life:

No longer delay, let us hasten away in the track of the sea gull's call, The sea is our mother, the cloud is our brother, the waves are our comrades all. What though we toss at the fall of the sun where the hand of the sea-god drives? He who holds the storm by the hair, will hide in his breast our lives. (1958, 5-8)

Naidu's poem "*Palanquin Bearers*" in *The Golden Threshold* is one of the poems which has a poem of great artistic beauty and has a rhythmic swing in it which is well in accord with the soft onward movement of the palanquin-bearers" (Sarojini Naidu and Her Poetry 1981, 122). They sing of the beauty of the bride and carry the palanquin with delight and with poise:

Softly, O softly we bear her along, She hangs like a star in the dew of our song; She springs like a beam on the brow of the tide, She falls like a tear from the eyes of a bride. Lightly, O lightly we glide and we sing, We bear her along like a pearl on a string. (1958, 7-12)

Thus through her poetry Sarojini Naidu threw light upon the Indian contemporary life



and its issues. Her sense of poetry is centred on an extraordinary bank of words which are so culturally specific that they can be easily sung with genuine emotions and thus depict the authentic heart of India..

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